



**ROSA
LUXEMBURG
STIFTUNG
SOUTH ASIA**

CHIMDIBHAR AASMAN

*Glimpses into the
migrant lives of lakhs of
adivasi workers:
Proceedings from the
three-day exhibition*

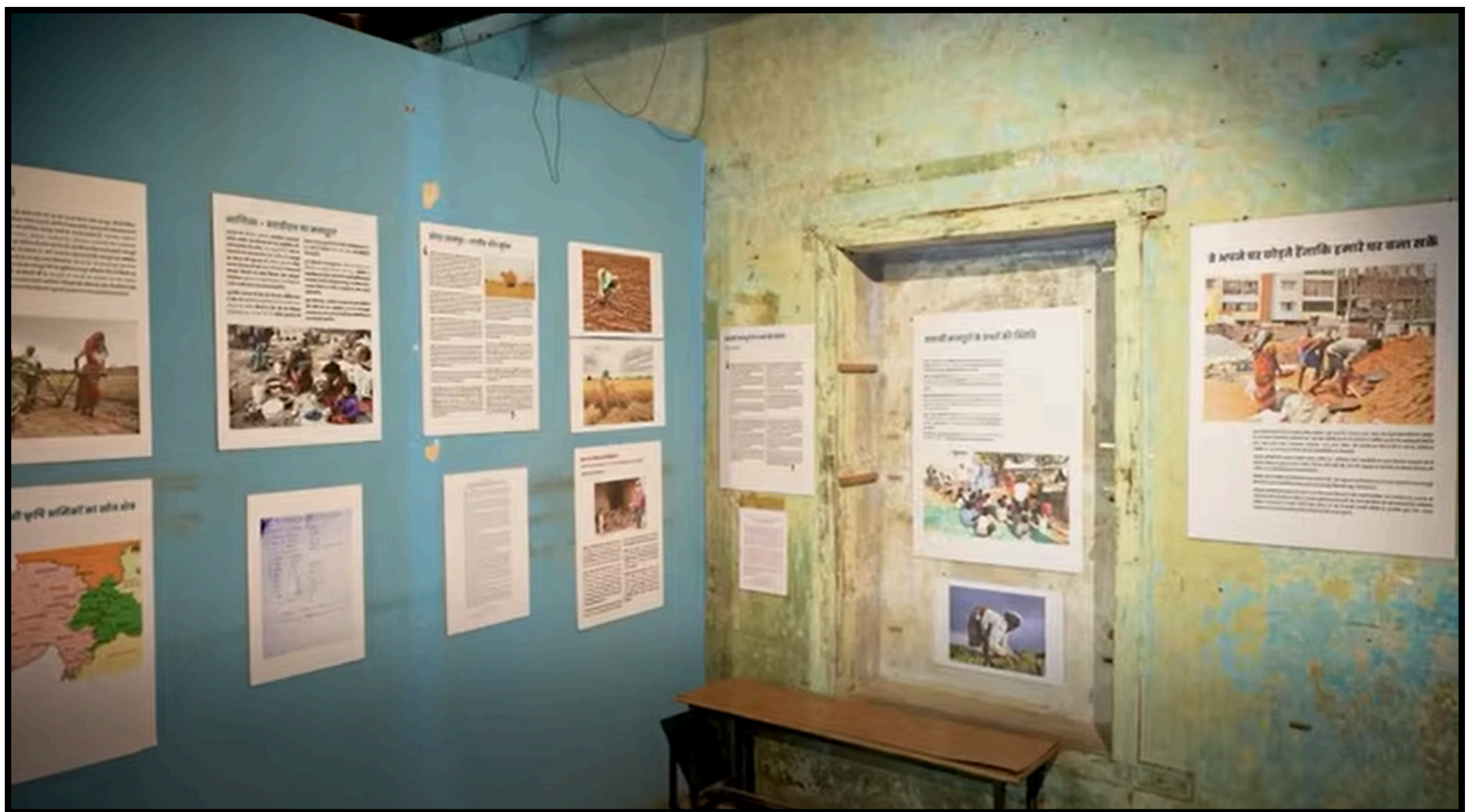
चिमडीभर आसमां

लाखों आदिवासी मजदूरों के
प्रवासी जीवन की झलकियाँ



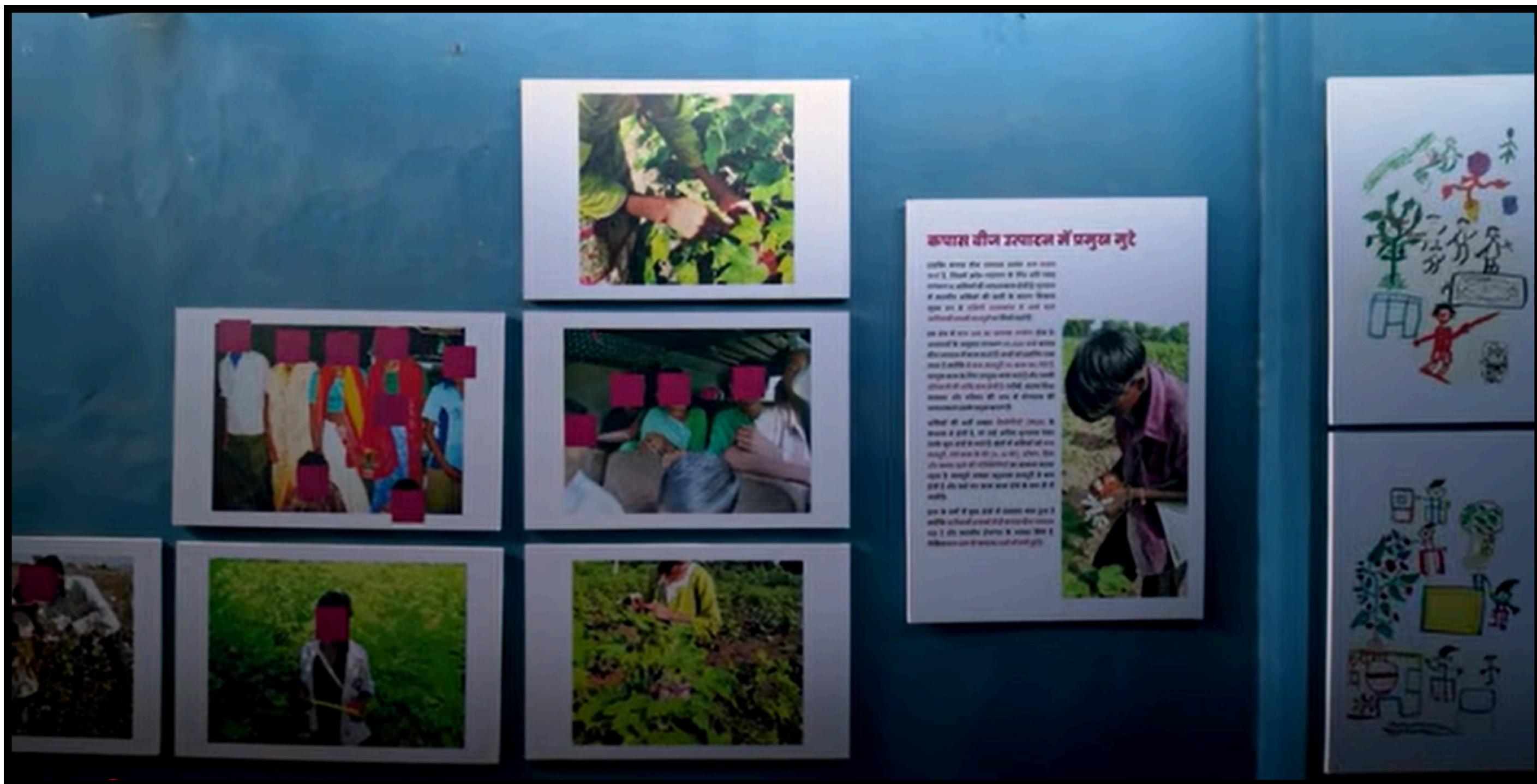
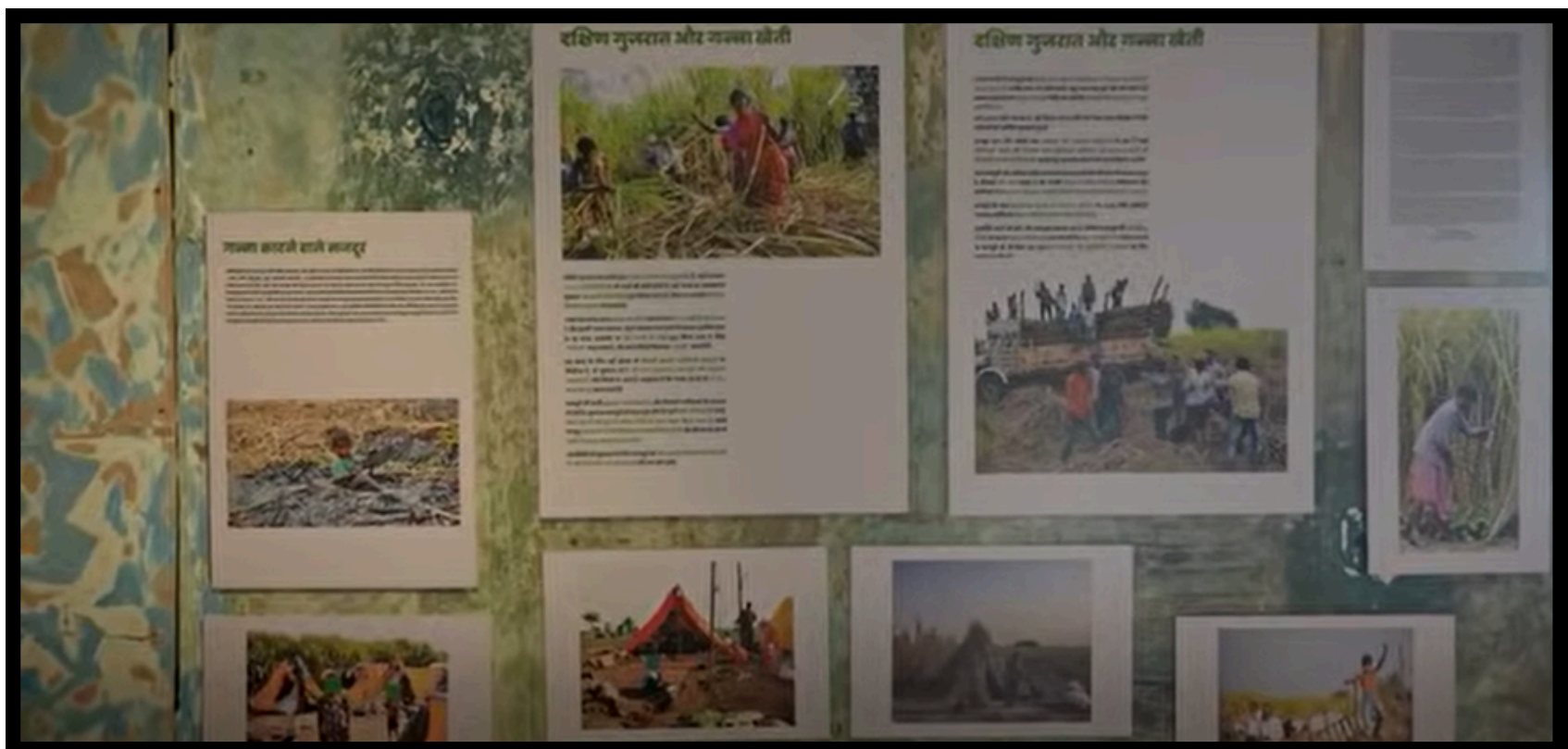
On 19th, 20th and 21st March, 2026, the **Centre for Labour Research and Action and Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung** organised a three-day exhibition on the working and living conditions of tribal migrant workers in Western India. The exhibition was aimed at highlighting the migration journeys of workers in the tribal belt migrating from the states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, and the Union Territories of Dadra and Nagar Haveli. The majority of the construction and agriculture workers in Gujarat are seasonal tribal migrants.

The tribal workers occupy the bottom of the labour chain – performing the hardest tasks at the lowest wages under very poor and often risky work conditions. Working in the informal sector, they have no access to labour laws, with debt bondage and child labour still a reality. Unable to afford rental housing, a large number live in open and untenable slums in cities like Ahmedabad and Surat.



The workers are usually concentrated in the areas of construction labour, sharecropping, sugarcane harvesting and brick making. In destination sites, workers have to face exploitation and discrimination in the construction sites, sometimes also in the form of bonded labour. Female workers face greater discrimination, such as lower wages, unpaid care work, both in their workplace as well as their home. The exhibition is aimed at highlighting these issues and providing a platform for the tribal workers.

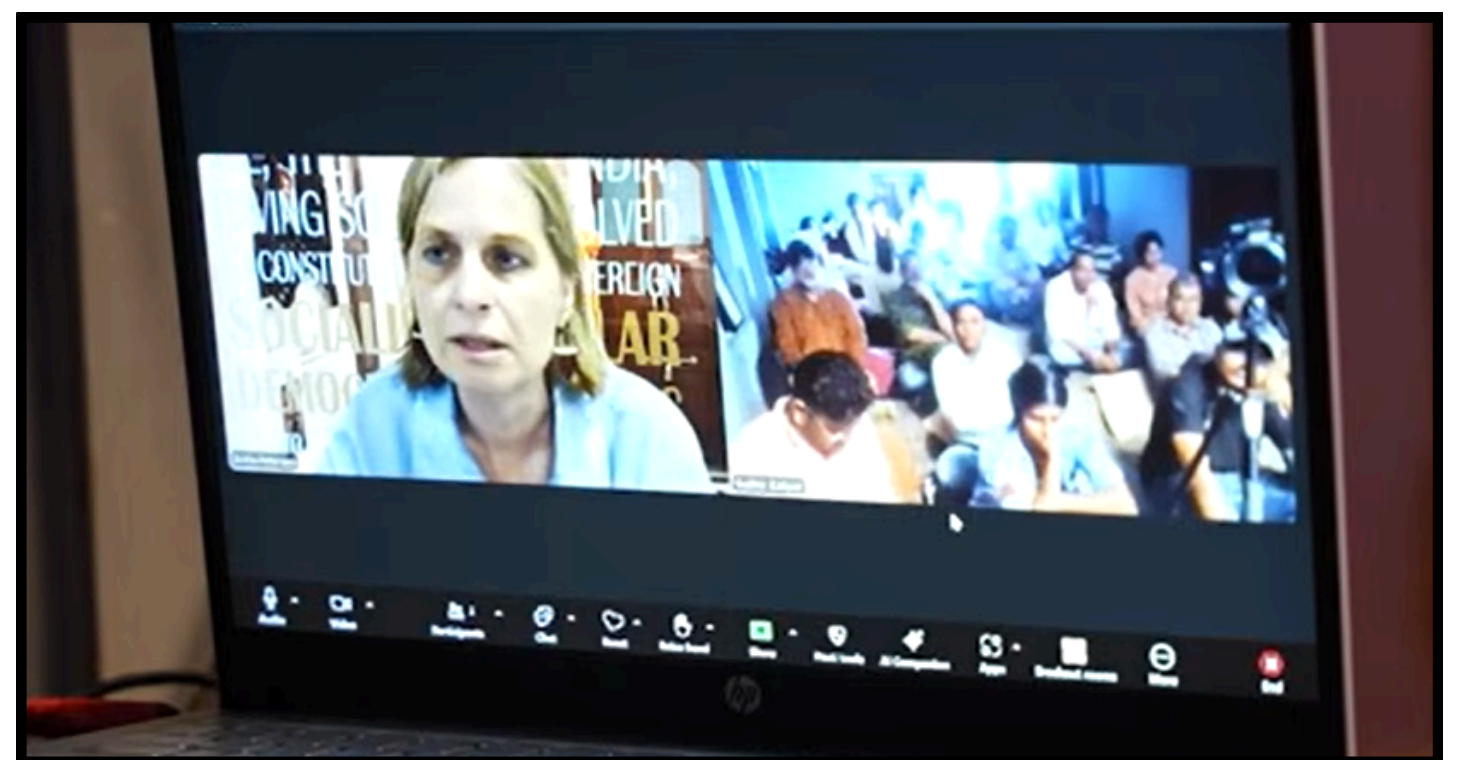
The exhibition was aimed at depicting this reality. The exhibits focused on the history of migration from the region and the shifts in the patterns over the years. Through art, sound, text, film, performance, and dialogue, the exhibition welcomed the public to see, hear, and feel the continuum of labour, longing, and life-making behind migration. The focus of the exhibits/acts was to demonstrate the reality of migration from the region, the system of extraction, the dignity of labour, and moments of collective action and solidarity.



DAY 1

The event began with a short viewing of the clip 'Chimdibhar Aasman', a short film made by Vaibhav Jadhav (Dhrishti Media). **Sudhir Katiyar, the founder of CLRA**, explained the film's relevance. The film depicted the struggle of some sugarcane harvesters who were stopped from selling the remaining husk of the sugarcane or 'chimdi', which would fetch them extra money, acting as an added source of income in their already meagre earnings. The name of the exhibition was picked from the short film.

Britta Peterson, the Head of Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Delhi, spoke about the importance of events such as this, especially in a setting where the rights of the workers, especially tribal adivasi people, are being taken away from them every day.



YSK Prerna, the Director of Conflictorium, spoke about how the space was designed such that people from different backgrounds could come together, leading to the production of transformative knowledge through discussions.

Mrityunjay Mukherjee, the curator of the exhibition, spoke about the urgent need to tell the stories of the tribals of the western belt of the country, which is lesser known and discussed less often.



Shanti Lal Meena and Anamika Singh from CLRA then explained the importance of the exhibition. They explained the relevance of the term Bhil Desh, which was coined in 1896, and includes the four major source states of migrants, that is, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. Migration, they mentioned, was critical for small and marginal landholding workers who don't have adequate sources of livelihood in the villages. According to research, almost 2/3rds of Adivasi from these regions are migrating. Further, CLRA's calculations posit that approximately 1 crore persons - including workers and their children - are migrating from these regions.

PANEL DISCUSSION

The first panel discussion was moderated by Shanti Lal Meena and included representatives from different socio-political organisations. The discussion was centred around understanding how the reality of tribal migration can be included in the political discourse, from where it is currently absent.

Govabhai Rathore, a Dalit activist, spoke about how tribal workers leave all of their life and culture behind to come and live in the cities, where they are often not able to engage with the politics of the destination states. In a way, they have been alienated in both their source and their destination sites. A common strategy to unite them is missing. Importantly, when we see that there are more than 1 crore tribal adivasi workers migrating, we foremost need to make the workers themselves realise their power. Further, we need to work on uniting them based on their labour, and not their caste alone.



Sunil Singhadia, a prominent tribal leader, spoke about the importance of building political representation for the tribal workers, mainly because their issues never see the light of day. In the case of the Bharat Adivasi Party or BAP, the leader is elected by the people. The leader who is representing the party currently in the Vidhan Sabha is thus a true representative of the people. Instead of leaders they don't recognise, the party believes that the people need an independent, people-chosen voice to represent them. For now, he said the party is thinking about building a policy which ensures those migrating out are registered, such that there is a record of their migration.



Next, **Madhuri Krishnaswamy from Jagrit Adivasi Dalit Sangathan** spoke about the need to focus on the history of the tribal people. First, the adivasi were free, after which they became farmers. However, after that, they eventually lost their land as well, and today they don't even fully own their bodies. *The question of independence, thus, is not a question of the future, but of the unfulfilled freedoms of the past.* The Adivasi community has always worked together. In such a case, the election or selection of a single person who represents everyone and makes a decision can also be questioned. An elected representative is definitely important, but it needs to be accompanied by the mobilisation of the workers and their effective participation. It is also important to question what we see as development. Is it just about a single person prospering in their lives financially and otherwise, or is the community also in the picture? Because community growth is what the tribal culture propagates. Is it okay that the two options we have in society today are being a saheb or a worker? Is it okay that we are encouraging our children to become oppressors?

Next, **Lakhanbhai Pawar**, a prominent tribal leader from Maharashtra, shared that post-independence, the Indian government started thinking about the adivasi even less. As the adivasi keep migrating, they are losing their land and space in their source states, which is further disenfranchising them. They are also losing their right to reservation. For this reason, elections and migration are linked. For instance, whenever there are elections in source states, they ensure it happens when the workers are migrating out. The powerful want land, and the best way to get that land is to ensure that the tribal workers are constantly on the move.

Next, **Kadam Singh Ganava, the State (Gujarat) President of the Adivasi Parivar Majdur Sangathan Bhagiya Majdur** shared his experience of being at the helm of a very recent organising effort in his village. A sharecropper himself, Singh started off by saying that he had never voted in his life. He has also never seen a voting booth. He has been in Gujarat for two years, but the issues that the workers are facing haven't changed. He spoke about his comrades who are not getting their share in sharecropping arrangements. Since they are not educated or empowered to fight, they are also not able to fight back. He reminisced about how, for his first protest, when he reached the site of protest, they were immediately put in jail and interrogated. Their voices are constantly being stifled and erased.



On his plan to take the movement forward, he said that first, he plans to build the documentation of the workers in their source states, build a proof of their migration and build a record of their land ownership.

More discussion followed after the panel, where there was talk about the need to build more schools to enhance the education of tribal folks. The participants mentioned that while we do have movements, it is important to raise the right issues. Someone also noted that the adivasi are only being elected from the reserved seats, thus emphasising the importance of reservations as well as questioning critiques against the policy.

The panel was followed by a performance which included both the playing of instruments and dancing by a tribal group from Chota Udepur. Their performance is termed as **Chada/Timli Nrutya** and includes the usage of instruments such as the flute and dhol. This music is usually performed locally in Chhota Udepur, Gujarat, by both men and women. The group also engaged the audience in a delightful participatory performance.



DAY 2

While the exhibition was ongoing since 11 am, the sessions with the respective speakers began later in the day.

The first session of the day included a panel discussion with Ganesh Devy, Babubhai Ninama and Ashok Choudhary. The session was moderated by Preeti Oza.

The first speaker was **Ganesh N. Devy**. He is a thinker, cultural activist and an institution builder best known for the *People's Linguistic Survey of India* and the Adivasi Academy created by him. Devy spoke about his experience of teaching at the MSU Baroda University, where he felt that there was more emphasis given to the languages of Europe or other countries, and not really the languages around him. It urged him to focus more on the language and culture of his country. He and his wife noticed the workers coming to the nakkas, where the workers were congregating every day. For two years, they noted down the names of each worker who was coming there and found that the surnames of all the people were similar. Slowly, he learnt more about where they came from and their reasons for living in the city.



He delved more into the Forest Act of India, and realised that tribals are only termed as such in those states which have been colonised. This is because the British were always fixated on controlling land. The tribal population usually did not accept the rule of the kingdom, and for that reason, it was essential to find a way to access the land which was under them. The term tribals and subsequent laws which criminalised them were thus a way to gain control over their land.

He insisted that we need to move away from a simple understanding of ecology and move towards ecocracy where the people have a greater say in the changes that are taking place in their ecology.

Next, **Ashok Choudhary the convenor of the Adivasi Ekta Parishad**, spoke about how agriculture was the first tool which controlled women, land and animals. Before that, civilisation did not see the kind of demarcation of land or property which agriculture essentialises. Today, the surplus generated from the exploitation of the agricultural workers is being used to fuel the industries around us. In the United Nations Rio Conference, in which he was also a part, they believed that the indigenous lifestyle or the culture of the tribals would solve the issues of climate change. He wondered, through his experiences on the field, how the victims of exploitation would bring about change.

He spoke about the importance of strengthening the rights of the workers by respecting their right to their spaces, which are being taken away from them. The education system is also highly privatised and wants students to eventually become contributors to the same industrial capitalist regime.



Babu Bhai Ninama is a primary school teacher (BA, PTC) in Dahod. He is also an activist. He spoke about how he did not know anything about Adivaasi culture in the beginning. In fact, he was also not proud of the same. However, by educating himself on the tenets of adivaasi culture, he built his knowledge and activism. He learnt about how the tribals are the most exploited community.

The adivasi community is not against the government. But all they question is if they are working according to Article 169 of the UN Constitution, which advocates for better living conditions of the workers of the country, why India, a signatory to these laws, is not acting on them. Today, the land is being taken away from the migrating adivasi, and their culture is being erased. Their rituals are being Sanskritized. For instance, earlier the village sarpanch used to conduct the marriage ceremonies of those getting married; today it is being done according to Brahmanical rituals. The rich fear that if the adivaasi progresses with good education, who would build the buildings of the rich?

A speaker from the audience also spoke about how on a greater level this reflects the colonisation of one system of thought by another. It is important to look at the events from a historical perspective as a consistent disenfranchisement of the tribals by earlier the British and now other institutions. If we were to look at today's problems only, and dismiss the history that has led us here, we wont be able to work on the solutions.



The day ended with **a nukkad natak performed by the residents of the bastis of Ahmedabad, directed by Ashwinbhai Vaghela of CLRA.** The play, through different scenarios, threw light on the different challenges faced by tribal migrant workers in the city of Ahmedabad. Even though the tribal adivasi worker is the one growing the crops which we eat today, they sleep hungry. Even though the tribal adivasi worker is the one who is building our homes, they don't have one.

This was followed by a music and song performance by **Bhaveshbhai Khat's music group.** Bhaveshbhai's group consists of singers and musicians who perform on social issues such as organising workers, reservations, etc.



DAY 3

On the third day, the panel focused on the confluence of literature and tribal culture. The session witnessed recitations by Adivasi poets and artists who shared powerful expressions of migration, memory, identity, and resistance. Through poetry, storytelling, and performance, the session offered intimate glimpses into lived experiences that often remain unheard. The speakers were moderated by Kanubhai Vasava and included Payalben Rathwa, Barkha Valvi and Anandbhai Vasava. Vandana Tete also joined the session online as a speaker.

Kanubhai Vasava, associate professor at Gujarat Vidyapeeth, began the session by emphasising that poetry and literature are not an end in themselves but a source of bringing to the fore those narratives which have been ignored for so long. Wherever politics ends, he said, poetry begins.



Payalben Rathwa, a warli artist and activist, noted that she had always noticed how women dominate all forms of labour, whether at home or otherwise. Even when it comes to tribal songs or poetry, these songs are sung by women. Adivasi women can do everything. She went on to show two Warli paintings she had made during the course of the exhibition. In one, female construction workers were working at a construction site, but upon closer look, one would notice that some of the women working were also pregnant. With this, she wanted to throw some light on the physical stress pregnant construction workers have to undergo, who cannot afford to rest or take a break despite the pregnancy. She also shared instances of brutal rape and violence which she has witnessed Adivasi women undergo as an activist, and the urgent need to address the gendered violence against Adivasis.



She spoke about her art, which also acts as a form of resistance. If it weren't for her art, she would have no job and would be forced to live in poverty. She stressed that she is alive because of her art, which thereby becomes a tool of resistance.

Barkha Valvi, a writer and poet, recited a poem which discussed the narratives and resistance of Adivasi women workers. On the question of the difference between Adivasi history and Gujarat's history, **Anand Vasava, Associate Professor at Gujarat University** and the editor of tribal magazine, Adilok, shared that he doesn't think enough has been written about Adivasi culture. The Vidhan Sabha building, which stands in Gandhingar today, was built by the Adivasi people. It is important that we keep writing stories and literature about Adivasi people before it is erased. The Adivasi culture is such that it is accepted that nature has given to them. They don't want to reach the heights or alienate themselves from the people. They want to stay on the ground. He also recited a poem.

Vandana Tete, a Kharia and Hindi poet, resonating with the words of Ganesh Devy, spoke about how we ourselves don't pay attention to our own stories. The history of the migrant worker is absent from our literature. There is a perspective towards the adivasi which has been taught to us in school, and that which exists.

Ashwinbhai Vaghela, a member of Majur Adhikar Manch, also recited a poem on the importance of workers' resistance and the need to raise our voices and quit the silence.



**Click the
above image
to watch a
small video of
the exhibition**

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